



TRANS 27 (2023)

DOSSIER: REIMAGINING AUDIOVISUAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

Sounds of the Street Vendors: Collaborative Ethnographic Filmmaking and the Urban Soundscape of Havana

Sounds of the Street Vendors: El cine etnográfico colaborativo y el paisaje sonoro urbano de La Habana

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Abstract

Sounds of Street Vendors, a short documentary in the observational style recreates the urban soundscape Havana through the everyday practices of vendors that sing pregónes (streetcries) to sell their goods. In this article, we will discuss the collaborative filmmaking process of street vendors from the points of view of an ethnomusicologist and a filmmaker and to how this type of multidisciplinary and multimodal approach of doing ethnography can create "different ways of knowing and learning together" (Chio 2023). Collaborative and multimodal ethnography also refers to move away from text centered research, one that recognizes the multisensorial and performative nature of the phenomena we explore in the field, and to the power of film to capture this multisensoriality and performativity in ways text can't (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). In the article we will also unpack the various underlying themes compressed during the documentary.

Keywords

Street vendors, urban soundscape, Cuban folk music, audiovisual ethnomusicology, multimodal anthropology.

Received: April 20th 2023

Acceptance Date: November 4th 2023

Release Date: December 31st 2023

Resumen

Sounds of Street Vendors, un documental corto de estilo observacional, recrea el paisaje sonoro urbano de La Habana a través de las prácticas cotidianas de los vendedores que cantan pregones para vender sus mercancías. En este artículo, discutiremos el proceso de filmación colaborativa de *Street Vendors* desde los puntos de vista de un etnomusicólogo y un cineasta y cómo este tipo de enfoque multidisciplinario y multimodal de hacer etnografía puede crear "diferentes formas de conocer y aprender juntos" (Chio 2023). La etnografía colaborativa y multimodal también se refiere a alejarse de la investigación centrada en el texto, una que reconoce la naturaleza multisensorial y performativa de los fenómenos que exploramos en el campo, y al poder del cine para capturar esta multisensorialidad y performatividad de maneras que el texto no puede (Dattatreyan y Marrero-Guillamón 2019). En el artículo también desgranaremos los diversos temas subyacentes comprimidos durante el documental.

Palabras clave

Vendedores ambulantes, paisaje sonoro urbano, música folclórica cubana, etnomusicología audiovisual, antropología multimodal.

Fecha de recepción: 20 de abril de 2023

Fecha de aceptación: 4 de noviembre 2023

Fecha de publicación: 31 de diciembre 2023

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Introduction

Sounds of Street Vendors, Havana, Cuba, made in the summer of 2015, by ethnomusicologist Jaime O. Bofill Calero and filmmaker Michael Brims, was an experiment in collaborative ethnography. The overall intention was to create a documentary sufficiently objective and informative for ethnomusicologists, but without losing the artistic qualities that make films appealing to wider audiences and filmmakers. “A slice of life” was the phrase one critic used to describe *Sounds of the Street Vendors*. In retrospect, these words neatly sum up the gist of what we were trying to accomplish with this film: create a sonic portrait of everyday life in Havana.

The cry of the street vendor, known as the *pregón* in Cuba, is tied to basic aspects of Havana’s city life. Vendors selling fruits and bread, others yelling out “flowers”, “peanuts” and even “TV antennas”, make up an ambulatory market sounding through the streets on a daily basis. As we learned more about the *pregón*, we found out, however, that what appeared as a basic and simple part of an informal economy, had deeper and more profound meanings that stretched far beyond the quotidian. Flowers, for example, were not just ornamental, but rather intrinsic to Santería worship, while peanuts, on the other hand, were linked to the nostalgia of Havana’s glorious past. In 1932 the streetcry of the peanut vendor became immortalized as one of the iconic sounds of the city’s bustling soundscape and more broadly of Cuban modernity through the international commercial success of Moises Simon’s popular song “El Manicero” (The peanut vendor) (Diaz Ayala 1988).

In this article, we will discuss the collaborative filmmaking process of *Street Vendors* from the points of view of an ethnomusicologist and a filmmaker and to how this type of multidisciplinary and multimodal approach of doing ethnography can create “different ways of knowing and learning together” (Chio 2023). We will also talk about the theoretical concepts from both ethnomusicology and filmmaking that guided the overall conceptualization of the film. Finally, we will unpack the various underlying themes compressed during the eight minutes of the documentary.

Key to our discussion is the concept of urban soundscape. *Street Vendors* draws on the field of sound studies (Andrisani 2017; Ochoa 2006) and urban history studies (Boutin 2015; Garrioch 2003; Wilson 1995). In this light the film was conceived as a study in “acoustic ecology” here referring to how sounds both human and non-human shape the world we live in (Schafer 1977) and to how sonic experiences constitute ways of encountering and understanding the life-world

(*Lebenswelt*) (Feld 2012; Ingold 2011). As we will discuss throughout the article the sounds of the street vendors form part of Havana's multilayered urban soundscape. The *pregón* in Havana is a recurring phenomenon that forms part of an auditory network tied to the informal and marginal yet very significant economic and social practices that often go unnoticed as part of everyday life in the city (Goffman 2008). The *pregón* also speaks to the precarious situation many Havana residents face in their day to day lives, one in which supply basic needs (food, cleaning supplies), services (knife sharpening) and other goods are acquired illegally or *por la izquierda*. *Street Vendors* juxtaposes the vibrant and gregarious sounds of Havana's streetlife with the city's decaying infrastructure and the precarity residents face in their daily existence. In Havana the aural practices of listening and sound out are indispensable to survival and empower communities vis a vis the "dystopian" and "exclusionary logic of everyday life in the city" (Andrisani 2017: iv).

Collaborative filmmaking in *Street Vendors* is synonymous to the interdisciplinary and multimodal method of ethnography we employed during our research. Multimodality taken from the growing field of multimodal anthropology refers to move away from text centered research, one that recognizes the multisensorial and performative nature of the phenomena we explore in the field, and to the power of film to capture this multisensoriality and performativity in ways text can't (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). Multimodal also speaks to the potential that film has in engaging viewers and its accessibility to wider audiences (Chio 2023; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). Throughout the article we will make reference to *Sounds of the Street Vendors*, which you can access online¹.

Observing Havana's Street Vendors and the Everyday: from an Ethnomusicologist's Point of View

The making of *Street Vendors*, a short film just under 10 minutes long, was quite spontaneous. Without much prior discussion about how we wanted to make the film, we took to the streets in the Vertovian spirit of "life caught unaware" and let our experiences in the field guide the creative process (Aufderheide 2007: 38). Different storylines and characters began to emerge from the material we collected: the diva peanut vendor, the more introverted knife sharpener, Santería devotees buying flowers. The compliance of most of the street vendors to collaborate with us versus the evasiveness of consumers to the camera's gaze hinted to us that this practice, though essential to Cuban everyday life, was still stigmatized as something "illegal," especially in the upper-class neighborhoods of Vedado.

Despite the film's organic and spontaneous creative process, we did agree beforehand to make the documentary observational. There is no narration or written text in *Street Vendors*, the story is told primarily through images and sound. The street vendors themselves don't even talk much. Despite the occasional interview soundbite from the street vendors, most of the information about street vending is transmitted through the sound itself of the streetcry, and through the sequence of clips which provide an aural understanding of how the *pregón* fits into the multilayered

¹ *Sounds of the Street Vendors Havana Cuba* is available here: <https://vimeo.com/187588487?share=copy>

urban soundscape of Havana. The film in this sense is more about providing a brief sensorial experience of Havana's urban soundscape and to the role of the *pregón* as part of the acoustic ecology of the city, than about providing an in-depth view of the street vendors themselves. In *Street Vendors* the synchronization of video, stillphotos and soundtrack bring to life the acoustic ecology of Havana "as an ongoing event of the city" (Wilson 1995: 4).

Instead of including ample narration and explanations we wanted to provoke the viewer to formulate his own ideas about street vending. Despite the open-endedness of the film, there were some key questions that guided us along the way: What sounds make up Havana's urban soundscape? How do the sounds of the street vendors fit within this sonic texture? Who are the street vendors and what is their role in Cuban society? Are their products locally made, acquired legally or as Cubans would say *por la izquierda* (referring to contraband)? How can we best use sound and image to capture the performative and multisensorial nature of street vending?

From an ethnomusicologist's point of view, making *Street Vendors* as an observational film was challenging. Despite the growing interest in "the visual dimension of musical performance practice and the use of film as a medium of presentation and research in Ethnomusicology" (D'Amico 2020), ethnomusicologists generally don't receive much formal training in filmmaking and aren't fluent in the audiovisual language necessary to make an observational film both engaging and informative². Ethnomusicology is writing intensive, we mainly translate our observations in the field into text. And when we do make films, they tend to rely heavily on voice-overs, narration, and interviews (many times featuring academics). As Benjamin Harbert argues most films made by ethnomusicologists "operate mostly in the perspicuous mode, favoring clarity over experience. Sensations are often explained rather than felt" (Harbert 2018: 5). Straying away from this convention, our intention in *Street Vendors* was to make a film where the images and sound would themselves be the "text," very much in the tradition of Les Blank's "narrator-less" documentaries *The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins* and *Chulas Fronteras* (Blank 1999)³. With less emphasis on the explanation Blanks films use the camera and cinematic language to "contextualize music" and operate in what Harbert calls the "experiential mode" (Harbert 2018: 12). The shift away from the "perspicuous" and towards the "experiential", though challenging, was the most experimental and educational part of my collaboration with Michael Brims.

This shift towards the experiential forced me to conceptualize ethnography from a

² The fact that there is a *Journal of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology*, special interest groups such as ICTM AVE, a growing number of films made by ethnomusicologists and publications dedicated to this topic, demonstrates the increasing awareness to the value that the audiovisual has in the field of Ethnomusicology.

³ In his blues film, Blank inter-splices musical field recordings, with interview soundbites from the musicians and B-Roll street scenes. The street scenes show Houston in 1967 and are overlaid with the musical field recordings. In his film, Blank creates a rich and multilayered filmic texture that allows the viewer to focus in on many different aspects. The absence of narration or accompanying commentary make this film attractive for musicologists, anthropologists and blues loving lay persons alike. For further information see Les Blank, "On the Making of the Blues according to Lightnin Hopkins" *Documentary Magazine* (December 1, 1999) IDA The International Documentary Association. <https://www.documentary.org/feature/making-blues-accordin-lightnin-hopkins>

filmmakers point of view: camera angles, movement, soundbites, equipment, shot sizes, story line, editing. During our trips into the field, I (Jaime) paid close attention to the decisions Michael made with his camera. He always seemed to notice small and intimate features, such as hands, faces and feet. In other instances, he focused on wide and medium frame shots, anticipating the street vendors as they made their music, this way contextualizing and leading up to the event. Retrospectively, these shots gave the film a dynamic quality and a sense of place. Rather than a passive observer his camera was inquisitive and curious, always looking to engage his subject. In other instances, however, he would observe from a distance and be quite removed from the circumstances.

A lot of Michael's footage was completely unrelated to street vending at all. Shots of bystanders, children playing baseball, the ocean front area of the Malecón, the art installations of the 2105 Biennale, all went into the folder labeled B-Roll. As inconspicuous as the name B-Roll might seem, this footage was key in creating the seamless narrative that bound together the different scenes in *Street Vendors*. Thinking of B-Roll, amplified my awareness regarding the differences between "filming" and "filmmaking" (Harbert 2018: 9). I realized that *Street Vendors* was not just about pressing record when encountering our subjects in order to document a musical event, but rather anticipating and preparing for the musical event, creating a narrative, a structure, basically telling a story. In the case of *Street Vendors* since we were documenting everyday life in Havana, our story many times began quite abruptly right as we walked out the door. On certain occasions street vendors sang right outside the window. There was an urgency to capturing these moments which otherwise would just fade into the past. In other cases, there would be long hours of waiting patiently with not much activity at all. Filming the everyday observationally changed my notions of place and awareness in the field: Where did the field begin/end? When am I "in" or "out" of the field? Who are my subjects? What are the differences in approaching subjects with a camera/without? How do I prepare to record these experiences on video? My fieldwork in Havana blurred the boundaries between: "field" and "observer", "etic" and "emic". Creating a narrative, thinking of images and sound as text, transformed the traditional ideas I had about ethnography. In working with Michael, I ultimately found out that though there are similarities, the camera and the pen require different ways of doing and thinking.

Telling the Story: Structure, Narrative and Some Technical Notes from the Filmmaker's Point of View

For me (Michael) as a filmmaker, the collaborative process with an ethnomusicologist was also new territory. In the past, I had mostly collaborated with other filmmakers. On several occasions, I had worked with anthropologists, musicologists, or folklorists as advisors, mainly to make sure no mistakes were made on content. But I had never collaborated with a musicologist in the field, pursuing subjects with cameras and microphones. I got to know Jaime at a conference at the Casa de las America in Havana, during our conversation he mentioned his fascination with the street vendors he encountered. A couple of days later we found ourselves roaming the streets of Havana in search of singing street vendors. The result was our short film *The Street Vendors of Havana*..

I was equipped with an old 5D Mark 2 Canon DSLR with 24-300 zoom lens on a monopod and Sennheiser boom & lavalier microphones, Jaime was shooting with his consumer Canon video camera. Although more on the minimalistic side, our equipment did allow us to capture both high-quality video and audio. The low aperture zoom lens allowed for intimate close ups and artistically blurred-out backgrounds, the Sennheiser boom mic allowed for full-bodied sound recording of not only the music recordings, but also various B-Roll sounds, such as dogs, cars, and the urban clang. The lavalier mic made sure that interview sound bites were still audible in the hustle and bustle of old Havana. For our piece, we mixed both Jaime's and my footage. Jaime's camera provided more the wide and establishing shots, my camera was mostly responsible for close-ups.

As Jaime mentions earlier, our film was intended to be observational. The absence of explanation and narration, however, does not mean that the commentary of the filmmakers is not present. As Sheila Curran Bernard comments in her book *Documentary Storytelling*:

The power of documentary films comes from the fact that they are grounded in fact, not fiction. This is not to say that they're "objective." (...) Subjectivity is not the opposite of objectivity. All forms of communication are subjective. Someone made that film, just as someone painted that picture, took that photograph, or even aimed a surveillance camera in one direction rather than another. (Bernard 2015: 5)

The film begins and ends with the iconic peanut vender Lisette. She exclusively works on and around Havana's Plaza Vieja, wearing a costume-like white dress mostly to attract tourists. One might say, she is not mainly in the peanut selling business, but her main occupation is playing the "role" of a street vendor. But Lisette also invites us to look behind the role she plays. After her song in the beginning of the film, she comments on her performance: "Because now I have your attention." After her song at the end of the film she says: "My name is Lisette, because I have a name." This is an invitation to the viewer to further ponder her relationship between her roleplaying and the actual street vending. It sets up the film's conceptual framework. For most foreign visitors, Lisette at the Plaza Vieja is most likely the first encounter with a Cuban street vendor. Beginning and ending the film with her functions as bookends to our film, it creates our window frame into the street vending soundscape of Havana.

It was our deliberate intention to not only provide the vendors and their street cries in our film, but to also embed them as much as possible in a visual and audible context, so the viewer would not only get familiar with the targeted songs of the street vendors, but also with all the street "noises" that function like musical bed for them, such as all the car sounds, the howling dogs, the Santería music coming from the street performance/celebration across the street, or the brass band playing on the Malecón.

We fade to black from Lisette's fist song and we come back to animated still images of Havana: locals fishing on the Malecón, kids playing baseball, cars on the Malecón, Havana's skyline from the ocean. After these images, we cut to a Santería performance in a residential neighborhood street and then to a sculpture of the 2015 Havana Biennale. This whole sequence sets the stage for

the story of our film to unfold. In five animated images and one short video clip, it portrays Havana as a city deeply caught in the tension between a modern artistically minded city, and on the other hand, deeply rooted in the religious practices of former African slaves. A city that on the one hand bears the marks of 60 years of socialism, yet where the influences of its strong neighbor in the North are still present. All the imagery used in this image sequence is highly symbolic, starting from the American flag painted Mikado sculpture on the Malecón to the cars on the street, one being a 1950 American car, the next one a 1980s Russian Lada, the one after that a more contemporary Chinese brand. These symbol-heavy images leave ample room for the viewer to analyze further if they wish to do so.

We don't only play the music that we recorded at this Santería performance when we show the performance, but we also pull it both under the animated images that precede and follow the scene of this performance. As a matter of fact, after we fade to black from Lissette, we start the music a split second before we come back to the images of Havana. It gives these B-Roll segments a certain "aura," a certain "state of mind," very subtle and in the background, yet still very present.

We also use that technique later on in the film, where we start the flute playing of the knife sharpener a couple of seconds before we actually see him. Like in our everyday lives, we often hear things long before we see them. Or we hear them, then we turn our heads to see them.

What was most interesting for me in working with Jaime were the different eyes or rather ears he perceived our surroundings with. Whereas I was always mainly concerned with angles and proper framing, his attention was much more focused on the actual melodies and their symbolic meaning. Between the both of us we got, so I think, the perfect mixture: the eye of the filmmaker and the ear and musical training of the musicologist.

The *pregón*: resisting modernity, resignifying modernity

Havana is a place like no other in Latin America. Its crumbling and decrepit buildings, especially in the colonial Old Havana and the upper-class barrios of Vedado give a sense of the sophistication and glory the city once had. Complementing its Old world and neoclassical architecture, lies the Malecón an extensive promenade overlooking the sea which gives the city an infinite sense of amplitude, and a connection to the Atlantic world. Newer buildings in the more sober Soviet style give the city an interesting mix of old and new. Nevertheless, one can tell the urban skyline has hardly changed since the fall of the Soviet Union, giving the city the feel of a living museum.

The city's soundscape also contributes to its timelessness. The sounds of throwback machines like the old 1950 cars (*Almendrones*), street musicians performing classic Cuban son, and street vendor cries are all indexical of the city's rich history (Carpentier 2012). The *pregón* as a longstanding Cuban tradition is tied to different moments of this past. As we will discuss in this section its local sounds overtime came to signify more than just the lowly streetcry. The sonic genealogy of the *pregón* from its oral roots to the different mediums through which it has been recontextualized —literature, popular and ethnographic sound recordings, written ethnographies, notated scores of avant-garde music, radio, TV and painting— speak to the multiple meanings it has

been given and the reveal the profound significance this tradition had in shaping Cuba's modernity.

Local sounds connected to a distant past

The sound that initially caught my attention was the arcane flute melody of the knife sharpener. One morning on the quiet streets of the Vedado neighborhood, removed from the noise of the city traffic and incessant murmur, its piercing melody broke the monotony of the day. Drawn to this familiar sound, I looked outside the window. A man shouted: "*El afilador, llegó el afilador, machetes, cuchillos, tijeras.*" Working a bicycle powered contraption, he filed the cutlery and scissors of the Vedado residents on a rotating wheel. The sounds of the knife sharpener have been a constant to city life in different parts of the Ibero-American world since medieval times. The origins of this trade are believed to be Galician (Avery 2015). One of the earliest sources is the painting *El afilador* by Galician painter Antonio de Puga (1602-1648).

True to Cuban "inventiveness", the street vendor had created a knife-sharpening machine by repurposing his bicycle to power the rotating wheel. Astounded by this rare artifact of urban archeology, I quickly grabbed my camera, and began taking notes. To that day I had only heard a similar melody on a playback device. Hearing how similar the sounds performed on the actual flute were to the recording raised interesting ideas on the evolution and continuity of this ancient practice.

On the other side of the street, two women in a high-pitched drone yelled: "*escobas, recogedor araganes*". They were selling "brooms, dustbins and hangers." From the gates of her majestic yet run down neoclassical mansion, a lady signaled them over. I asked if I could record their exchange, the resident smiled and ignored me as she reentered her house. Their cries soon fade away. The sounds of flute can be heard in the distance. The calm and monotony of the Vedado is restored.

As the morning hours slipped by, I couldn't help but feeling as if life was transpiring at a slower rhythm. The ancient sounds of the pan-flute, the salmodic chant of the broom vendors, the knife sharpeners makeshift bicycle contraption, and the worn-down neoclassical architecture of the majestic Vedado neighborhood, though very real seemed removed from the contemporary world, had I travelled back in time? Fascinated by the feeling of temporal displacement, I went to explore the rest of the city and confirmed that I was actually in another dimension. Immersed in the city's bustling street life, the roaring engines of the 1950 American cars, street bands performing the classic Buena Vista Social Club tunes, all conspired to create a profound sense of nostalgia and further fed my imagination. Were these the sounds of Havana during the modern era?

Pregón: Folklore, the avante-garde and Cuban musicology

According to Alejo Carpentier, what I heard in the Vedado neighborhood resembled the soundscape of Havana during the Republican Period prior to the Cuban revolution (1959). In his article "Pregones Habaneros" (1944) Carpentier briefly describes the sounds of the knife sharpener, the flower

vendor's salmodic drone, and of course the iconic *pregón* of the peanut vendor, "El manicero" (Carpentier 2012: 401). In a nostalgic tone he laments the gradual disappearance of this "primitive" folk tradition. However, brief the mention of the *pregón* might be, in within the extensive literature produced by Carpentier, it is clear he considered it a timeless folk tradition worthy of being "conserved". Carpentier, both a writer and musicologist, was an influential voice in shaping Cuban nationalism during the 20th century. Alongside composers Alejandro Garcia Caturla and Amadeo Roldán he formed part of an elite group of intellectuals known as the "minoristas" who represented Cuba's vanguard movement. Carpenter's musicological oeuvre not only defined the sounds representative of the nation, but also nurtured a Cuban avant-garde music that looked back to its folk traditions for inspiration. In Amadeo Roldan's "Tres pequeños poemas" (1926) "I Oriente, II Pregón III Fiesta Negra" the streetcry is resignified as the sounds of the new music symbolic of Cuba's modernity.

El manicero llegó: the *pregón* and the popular music industry

According to Cristobal Diaz Ayala, the emergence of the *son-pregón* marked a before and after in Cuban popular music. The *son-pregón* was crucial to the rise of the popular music industry which he considers one the most significant and far-reaching developments in Cuban history during the first half of the 20th century. In his book *Si te quieres por el pico divertir*, Diaz Ayala traces the history of the *son-pregón* as a commercial genre back to its roots, the streetcry (or folk *pregón*). In the first chapters he provides an exhaustive account of the folk *pregón* in pre-revolutionary Cuba, mentioning the extensive array of articles and services peddlers offered, as well as the distinctive cries characteristic of each trade: fruits, peanuts, knife sharpening, fish, bottle recycling, brooms, sofa, and bed repair, and so forth (Diaz Ayala 1988). The preindustrial *pregón* as an oral means to market goods could be seen as the precursor to the modern jingle. The most significant transformation Diaz Ayala discusses however is the "recontextualization" or "entextualization" of the streetcry to the vinyl record.

The primary architect of the *son-pregon's* sonic recontextualization was composer Moises Simons. His song "El manicero" (The Peanut Vendor) took the world by storm during the 1930s. Popularized by diva Rita Montaner and Don Azpazu's orchestra, "El manicero" had European and North American audiences dancing to the sensuous rhythms of the Cuban son. As the first Latin hit to sell over a million copies of sheet music and records in 78-rpm format, the song opened the door for many Cuban and Latin artists to the popular music industry. Riding the wave of popularity propelled by "El manicero" many other vendor cries made their way onto vinyl recordings, some noteworthy examples being Celia Cruz's "El Yerberito Moderno", Felix Caignets "Frutas del Caney" and "El Botellero" by Gilberto Valdez.

Lisette an authentic street vendor?

As Michael Brims mentioned earlier, *Street Vendors* intentionally begins with the iconic *pregón* of the Peanut Vendor in the voice of Lisette. Roaming the streets of Old Havana, Lisette sells her

peanuts for \$3CUC (\$3 dollars). Considering that the average salary in Cuba is \$25 dollars a month, her peanuts are quite expensive. Singing the lyrics of Moises Simons “El Manicero” she walks the Plaza Vieja dressed in a provincial costume similar to the rest of the cast of folk characters that perform each day in these areas for tourists. Lisette is actually the only street vendor recognized by the state-run Oficina del Historiador (Office of the Historian), an agency in charge of safeguarding Havana’s cultural patrimony. This officiality grants her exclusive rights to do business in Old Havana. Her performance of the Peanut Vendor “El manicero” brings up interesting questions regarding authenticity and to the liminal nature of streetcry as a tradition lying at the intersections of the popular and folk, legal and illegal, past and present. In comparison to the rest of the street vendors we encountered we could say that Lisette belongs more to the Cuba of the past, to the “folklore” of an imaginary Cuba founded on the modern myths generated by the lettered elite and the popular music industry. In this light her performance of “El manicero” is informed as much by the musicology of Carpentier as by the popular renditions of commercial diva Rita Montaner. The fact that she can sell her peanuts in CUC in the central areas of Old Havana while other street vendors sell in CUP in the peripheral areas of Vedado also denotes how ideas of the modern constructed by elite intellectuals and the popular music industry generated discourses of power which legitimized certain sounds while excluding others. Ultimately the legitimized sounds of the Peanut Vendors such as Lisette versus illegitimized sounds of the street vendors we encountered outside the tourist area of Havana Vieja, speak to how Havana’s urban geography is conditioned by a “logic of exclusion” which “fractures” the city's citizenship (Andrisani 2017: iv).

The pregón: sonically recontextualizing the modern

We can conclude then that the recontextualization of the local sounds of the streetcry to other mediums –literature, avant-garde concert music, popular recordings– and their global circulation were pivotal in projecting Cuban culture to the world and shaping its modernity throughout the first half of the 20th century. As Ana María Ochoa argues, the “sonic recontextualization” of the local was crucial to the “constitution of an aural modernity in Latin America”:

... the history of twentieth century aurality in Latin America can be seen (or heard) as one of constant processes of recontextualization –of differential schizofonic moments one could say- done through different politics and aesthetics of transformations and mixing- from the *avant garde* to the popular, from the mainstream to the countercultural. (Ochoa Gautier 2006: 806)

Ochoa also points out that sonic recontextualizations were often accompanied by “epistemologies of purification” carried out by intellectual elites which sought to “provincialize sounds in order to ascribe them a place in the modern ecumene” (Ochoa Gautier 2006: 804). The simultaneous practices of “sonic recontextualization” and “epistemologies of purification” were crucial in defining what she calls the “aural public sphere” in Latin America, a domain through which we can better understand the regions, and in our case Cuba’s “highly unequal modernity” (Ochoa Gautier 2006:

804); and how sound –some officialized others unwanted or illegal– define the politics of coexistence in contemporary Havana.

In *Street Vendors*, our intention was to subtly present Cuba as a country caught “between traditions that have not yet disappeared and a modernity that has not yet arrived” (Garcia Canclini 1995: 1). A place where face-to-face intermediality is still the *modus operandi* of everyday life, and where folk, popular and high culture are very much connected to the everyday. The dialogic relationship between the *pregón* as folk practice and a popular music genre is also central to the film, and indicative of the mutlivocality of a tradition situated between the domains of low and high culture, local and global, the legal and illegal. The resurgence of the streetcry in Havana is a reflection of Cuban resilience to the harsh realities they currently face and as a true mark of the unequal modernity that is so jarringly visible and audible in Havana.

Havana: Sounds of the City, the *Pregón* as Performance of Everyday Life

From Emily Thompson’s perspective, modernity is essentially a history of sound. In her book *The Soundscape of Modernity* she discusses how urban cities were basically designed to harmoniously accommodate and harness the new sounds of technology as well as to keep out unwanted noise (Thompson 2008). As she points out urbanities new culture of listening brought about certain noise abatement policies that targeted sounds deemed unfit of the cityscape. These policies as well as the unprecedented crescendo of sound generated by machines –trains, cars, airplanes, radios– drowned out “traditional auditory irritants” –animals, musicians, street vendors, and basically any form of unwanted noise associated with the voice (Thompson 2012: 121)⁴.

Considering that modern cities in different parts of Europe and the first world became hostile environments for the voice and oral traditions and that street vending in Cuba was outlawed after the revolution of 1959, as state officials considered this preindustrial practice to be incompatible with the modern communist state (García Molina 2020), the current renaissance of the *pregón* in Havana that we captured in *Street Vendors* might seem odd. As Andres Garcia Molina discusses “from colonial times until 1959 street vendor songs were a central component of everyday sociality and street economies in Cuba” (García Molina 2020: 8). The resurgence *pregón* after the temporary banishment that lasted five decades is due in large part to the shortage of supplies and the dire economic situation the island experienced since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing special period (1991-2000). Molina also comments that Cuban government policies put forth since 2010 to incentivize self-employment depend largely on an economy that can only be exercised through ambulatory vending. “As such, the very notions of self-employment, entrepreneurship, and consumption that arise in contemporary Cuba depend, to a large extent, on the mutual circulation of sound and goods. For many self-employed Cubans, no transaction is possible without potential listeners” (Garcia Molina 2020: 8). Streetvending as part of Cuba’s

⁴ For an interesting discussion on the significance of the song of the French Street vendor known as the “Cris de Paris” within the urban soundscape of Paris during the 19th century, see Aimee Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

flourishing “aural economy” here referring to the ways in which “sound enables modes of exchange” (Garcia Molina 2020), forms part of an auditory network of information which serve to connect and situate communities in both time and space. As sonic experiences these “auditory communities” constitute ways of encountering and understanding the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) (Feld 2012; Ingold 2011) and is enacted through the performance of everyday life (Garrioch 2003)⁵.

In a similar vein, Vincent Andrisani discusses the significance of Havana’s “acoustic communities” as a means to grant residents access to political power through what he calls “sonic citizenship”:

Cultivated on the basis of social reciprocity and collective participation, *acoustic communities* give life to a city in which residents are firmly grounded, and that they fully inhabit. It is a means through which the local population can, albeit momentarily, enact a sense of autonomy and political agency amidst a geography that threatens to take it from them. (Andrisani 2017: 5)

Streetvending embodies the sonic citizenship which Andrisani conceptualizes as an auditory and performative practice through which Havana’s residents creatively negotiate the precarity of their everyday life.

The pregón as Performative

In looking back at the history of city life, the sounds of the street cry have been a characteristic from the beginning of human civilization to the present. Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the sounds of the marketplace or “language of the marketplace,” as core elements to the burgeoning of urban life in medieval Europe (Bakhtin 1968). The marketplace, as a loud, chaotic and competitive scene, demanded that each vendor develop a particular way to attract possible consumers, through the persuasive skill of entertaining them enough to buy their products. Over time, their cries and the performance they entailed became synonymous with the different trades they represented. Street vendors became archetypes of urban history not just through everyday business (performance) but also via different ways of textualization –literature, painting, music, and history⁶.

In *Street Vendors*, we can appreciate the full continuum of the *pregón*’s archetypes and the different ways this trade represents “the performance of everyday life”⁷. The theatricality of the *pregón* lies in the subtle balance between “work and play”⁸. Most street vendors we filmed, though

⁵ For further information on “auditory communities” see: David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns” *Urban History* 30(01) (May 2003): 5-25.

⁶ For further reading on the early history of street vendors, see *Treasured Possessions: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* by Victoria Avery, et al. Philip Wilson Publishers, 2015.

⁷ The quote “performance of everyday life” is taken from Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman analyzes the performative elements in the routinary behaviors of the everyday.

⁸ Drawing in this section on theories of performance, the concept of “play” according to Richard Schechner is intrinsic to performing because it embodies the “as if”, the make-believe, see Schechner, *Performance Studies* (2006: 90).

somewhat curious and willing to participate, preferred to stay anonymous, quickly returning to their gregarious nature as they went about their business. Some, like the flower vendor and the guys selling detergent, let us interview them. Nevertheless, in the film they never “break out” of character, their personal identity remains unknown. They are strictly playing the role of the “flower vendor” or the “detergent guys.” Their cries, though “musical” in some respects, are for the most part rigidly mechanical, utilitarian, and quotidian, remaining common to the sounds of everyday life.

Lisette, on the other hand, from the very beginning of the film makes it clear that she does not intend to be anonymous. In fact, she is the only street vendor with a name. In the initial scene of the film, as she belts out the lyrics of “El Manicero” (“The Peanut Vendor”): “*Si te quieres por el paco divertir ... comprame un cucurichito de mani*” (“If you want to have fun... buy me a peanut brittle”), it is ambiguous as to what exactly she is selling: peanuts or the “experience” of buying peanuts from her. This ambiguity favors her allure, as she mainly attracts clients through her performance of Moises Simons memorable song “El manicero”; in the end, you are left with very expensive peanuts, \$3 CUC or \$3 dollars a packet!!! Though the notoriety of her renditions of “El Manicero” are of local significance, her exclamation at the end of the film “*Me llamo Lizette porque tengo nombre*” makes it clear that within this locality she is a star. Just before she exits the screen, she winks to the camera as if to say: “you know I’m a diva.”

The TV antenna vendor scene is definitely another moment in the film with performative symbolism. As he directly speaks to the camera “*¡Sálvame dame un one hundred!*” (Save me, give me one hundred!) It is left unclear, however, who he’s addressing with this comment: us the filmmakers, the audience, or both. Though he says “Save me” half-jokingly with a smile, there is an urgency to his voice that reflects the dire situation many of these vendors face in their everyday lives. “*Sálvame* (Save me),” is indicative of the liminal nature of the street cry. Lying somewhere between the theatrical and the real, its sounds are able to simultaneously signify a diversity of human emotions, in this case a combination of parody, humor, and lament.

Besides these two individual moments, the streetcry is for the most part anonymous. It is just one of the threads that make up the rich sonic texture of Havana’s urban soundscape. Along with the unwanted noise of the traffic, car alarms, the incessant murmur, the industrial clanging, the invasiveness of the radio, street cries have become naturalized, “quotidianized”. As recurrent urban phenomena, certain *pregones* are typical of the morning hours, others the evening and so forth, this way creating temporal awareness of city life. The *pregón* is also indexical to the locality of the spaces these vendors traverse. Walking daily routes quite systematically creates a familiarity among their clients and to these spaces. The *pregoneros* form part of the local identity of the Havana neighborhoods they walk, through the interaction with people they greet, sell, and negotiate with. street vendors make up the living networks that constitute the basis for everyday life in Havana, or what Eric Wilson calls the practices that “constitute the city as an ongoing event” (Wilson 1995: 4).

Conclusions

Street Vendors as an observational film brings audiences closer to the sensory experience of everyday life in Havana. Everyday life for most people in Cuba is not comparable to other places in America, there are no supermarkets, no McDonalds, and limited access to internet and outside communication. People buy fresh produce on a day-to-day basis in small markets or obtain government subsidized food: bread, rice, grains, meat, eggs, milk. Extended families often share a single roof, not many people own cars. Given this scenario it comes as no surprise, that Cubans take to the streets on a daily basis as they do.

Despite its decaying infrastructure and material limitations, Havana boasts a cultural life and natural resources that attracts people from all over the world. The scenes in *Street Vendors* along the Malecón during the celebration of the 2015 Art Biennale attest to the city's vibrancy, and to a longstanding connection of Havana with the avant-garde and its popular traditions. With the oceanfront as a natural backdrop, the lens captures the simplicity of people enjoying a warm Sunday afternoon, live music, cold drinks, art installations and, of course, peanuts and street vendors.

Our intention with this film was to capture the sounds of the everyday practices of Havana's street life. In studying the *pregón*, we discovered a practice, that allowed us to gain a small glimpse of how societies socially construct sound, to the significance humans bestow on the sounds of the quotidian, and to how these sounds are used to appropriate public space⁹. The *pregón* is a Cuban tradition, situated at the intersection between the folk and popular, illegal and legal, the performative and the quotidian, mundane and sacred, the past and the present. Through careful analysis, *Street Vendors* explores the various layers of Cuba's social fabric, which we juxtaposed in the film: the everyday, the avant-garde, popular, folk, religious, and Cuba's two-economies the CUC and CUP. Street vending, though ubiquitous in contemporary Cuba, is a cultural phenomenon quite universal throughout Latin America, and to other third-world countries, where sounding out in public spaces is not as regulated, and the aural public sphere still belongs to the "people".¹⁰ In Colombia, as filmmaker Angela Carabalí demonstrates in her interactive documentary *Pregoneros de Medellín*, street vending has a rich tradition, comparable in many ways to Cuba¹¹. More research on this topic however is needed to gain a better understanding of the current cultural implications of this practice within the region.

Though this article has allowed us to unpack a lot of the information compressed in the film and speaks to the importance of how ethnographic writing and filmmaking complement each other; *Sounds of the Street Vendors* was initially meant to be independent of this or any text. As of Spring 2019, the film has been publicly screened 21 times in 11 countries. Fifteen of those screenings were

⁹ Our analysis of street vending is indebted to the social theories of Michel DeCerteau's, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 2011, a pioneering study on the exploration of how everyday practices such as walking become essential to mapping out city life.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion on contemporary street vending in Cuba and the cultural significance of this practice to the local economy, see Andres García Molina, "Street Vendor Calls in Cuba: Music, Labor, and Infrastructure" (unpublished paper).

¹¹ See *Pregoneros de Medellín* online: <https://pregonerosdemedellin.com/#en>

put on by juried and competitive film festivals, six of them were invited screenings at academic institutions or conferences. The film has also won and been nominated for several awards and is available through the Alexander Street Press Filmmakers Library.

What is especially noteworthy about the film's reception is that it has attracted audiences far beyond a more traditional ethnomusicological circle. Besides being screened at ethnomusicological conferences and other academic settings, it has had a wide exposure to the general public through film festivals. Some of them being niche festivals, focusing on anthropological films, Caribbean or Latin American films, however, the bulk of the film's public screenings were put on by festivals geared to a much wider audience.

The positive reception of this film across such a wide spectrum of audiences supports the general trend in academia to work more interdisciplinary, to leave the ivory tower of one's discipline. This film benefits from looking at a familiar subject through a different set of eyes and ears or, in our case, through a different lens. What impact could interdisciplinary projects like these have on documentary filmmaking, on ethnomusicology, the visual arts? For us, it has definitely been a fruitful way to arrive at alternate ways of understanding ethnography, and to deeper appreciation of the human experience.

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Cita recomendada

Bofill, Jaime and Michael Brims. 2023. "Sounds of the Street Vendors: Collaborative Ethnographic Filmmaking and the Urban Soundscape of Havana". *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música/Transcultural Music Review* 27 [Fecha de consulta: dd/mm/aa]



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